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Reagan keeps option to add to 'contra' aid

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan said yesterday that the 18 months' worth of military aid he wants to give insurgents in Nicaragua may not be enough to accomplish American aims there and that he might have to return to Congress at the end of that period for additional funds.

The president also said he might go along with a compromise proposal for a limited delay of 60 to 75 days in providing the aid, as some congressional leaders have suggested, but would not agree to any plan requiring him to seek congressional approval a second time before funds could be used.

"I'd be willing to talk to them about something of this kind," he said in an interview with correspondents of *The Sun*.

In addition, Mr. Reagan portrayed the prospect of sending American troops to fight in Nicaragua as virtually non-existent anytime soon, but warned that if Sandinista expansionism was not checked now the United States eventually may have to defend its "interests" with military force.

He said, however, that if there were free and fair elections in Nicaragua, the United States would abide by the results even if the pro-Soviet Sandinista government came out the winner.

"I think we'd have to," he said.

The president acknowledged that a provision of the aid legislation now before Congress would remove restrictions on CIA activity on behalf of the "contras" and would permit the use of a secret contingency fund, but he said such wording was included primarily to permit U.S. training of the rebels and the exchange of intelligence information.

The president has mounted a ma-

Reagan interview

- ☐ The president may ask Congress for additional funds for the Nicaraguan "contras" beyond the current \$100 million request if the Sandinista government has not begun negotiations with the rebels at the end of 18 months.
- ☐ He will not agree to any compromise on "contra" aid requiring a second congressional vote on \$70 million in military aid, but he is "willing to talk" about a limited delay in using the money.
- ☐ He might be willing to meet with Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev after the November elections but he still prefers June or July.
- ☐ He continues to view U.S.-Soviet relations in a hopeful light.
- ☐ The probe of the Challenger explosion revealed "shortcomings" in launch procedures that concern him.

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for campaign to win congressional approval of an 18-month, \$100 million aid package for the Nicaraguan rebels, or "contras" — \$70 million of it in military aid and \$30 million in non-lethal logistical support.

The administration's policy, the president and his lieutenants have said, is designed to provide the contras with the weapons and ammunition they need to force the Sandinistas into negotiations and pave the way for internal reconciliation among the warring parties and other

sectors of Nicaraguan society.

Earlier yesterday the president sent his new Central American envoy, Philip C. Habib, to the region to meet with El Salvador's president, Jose Napoleon Duarte, and other leaders. There are no plans for Mr. Habib to meet with Nicaraguan officials.

Asked in the interview what the United States would do at the end of 18 months if the contras had failed to pressure the Sandinistas into talks, Mr. Reagan said, "I think this is something that you have to look at if such a time should come."

Did this mean that the current package, now moving toward show-down votes in the House and Senate next week, was not necessarily the end of U.S. funding and that he might have to seek more money at the end of 18 months?

"Yes," he replied, "I think it would be foolish to commit yourself to anything of that kind because this ... could stiffen the Sandinistas' resistance and [they could] say, 'All we have to do is hold out for 18 months.'"

On Sunday, Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, said on NBC-TV's "Meet the Press" program, "This money is for 18 months, and it shouldn't take more than 18 months or two years to create a situation in which it is clear to the Sandinistas they don't have a military track."

After meeting with Mr. Reagan last week, Alfonso Robelo, a contra leader, told reporters at the White House, "If we don't define the situation in 18 months, this revolution will already be eight years old and I don't think we have the right to continue any further with the bloodshed in Nicaragua."

The president defended the recent lackluster performance of the contras, saying that for the past two years, because of congressional refusals to provide military assistance, their active forces in Nicaragua have been reduced to only 6,000 fighters.

"There is no question that when we were able to give them some help, the contras were giving the

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Sandinista forces great problems," he said. "They've got a potential force of around 20,000. . . . But this is a matter of arms and munitions."

The administration has sent mixed signals in recent days on the possibility of a compromise on military aid for the contras, but Mr. Reagan seemed most disturbed by a proposal that would require a second congressional vote before the funds were released.

That proposal would tentatively approve the military aid, but delay its use for six months so that a last-ditch diplomatic effort could be made to force the Sandinistas into negotiations with the rebels. At the end of that time, Congress would assess the situation and vote again on releasing the money.

"If we're talking about some kind of a compromise where the Congress imposes a delay and takes the trigger away from me . . . I think that would be most counterproductive because the Sandinistas would feel they could hang on longer with the hope that we still wouldn't get what we're asking for," Mr. Reagan said.

Asked if he might agree to a 60-to-75-day delay if he were not required to get approval a second time, he replied, "I'd be willing to talk to them about something of this kind. I wouldn't want to commit to this because, as I say, the important thing is that the Sandinista government must not be left any loopholes in which they believe there . . . still might be the denial of this help."

Then the second vote is the real problem? "Yes, yes. They [the Sandinistas] have to know that we mean it and that we're going to help the contras."

The president said he felt that his remarks last week, in which he warned that the United States must send "money and material now so we'll never have to send our own American boys," had been misinterpreted and were not meant to leave the door open for military involvement.

"I don't think we'd have a friend left in Latin America if we used American forces," he said. "The image of the great colossus of the North is still too much in their minds. The contras don't want us. They want our help, they want the tools. They made it plain: They will furnish the manpower."

But speaking of the Sandinistas, he said, "What you do have to say is this: If we do nothing and this is allowed to grow and expand and carry its revolution across other borders, then the threat would remain that there would come a day when their hostilities would be directed at our own interests. And that is the time in which you could say, yes, then American forces would be involved because the hostilities were directed at us."

The Sandinista government, he added, was "a cancer that must be excised."

Explaining his desire to see restrictions on the CIA lifted, he said that now "we can't give advice, we can't offer training, we can't exchange information with the contras. And we feel that if we're going to help them with weapons and arms that we ought to be freed of those restrictions and allowed to provide this other assistance to them."